

**Quake-damaged school was on state seismic-warning list
Fanning Elementary in Brea is one of many below code despite warnings since 2002.**

Orange County Register

April 9, 2014

The Brea elementary school damaged by a 5.1 earthquake March 28 has never been upgraded for seismic safety despite years of warnings by state and district experts that it doesn't meet current building codes.

The quake cracked windows at Fanning Elementary, sprang books from their shelves and sent ceiling tiles crashing to the floor. Much of the campus has been closed as workers remove dust and debris containing asbestos, a carcinogen used for insulation and fireproofing in many older buildings.

Fanning is among more than 200 schools in Orange County constructed before California adopted stricter building standards in 1976 that state architects have identified as needing further study. Most of the schools have masonry walls, considered more likely to fail during earthquakes.

Like Fanning, many schools haven't been inspected or upgraded since the warnings were first issued in 2002, state records show. Schools aren't legally required to respond and have cited a lack of state funding. State officials say paying for upgrades is a local responsibility.

Brea Olinda Unified Superintendent A.J. "Skip" Roland acknowledged last week that he'd been misinformed about the state's warnings and would reconsider a detailed evaluation of the school.

"Obviously there is something that needs to be looked at," Roland said. "The question would be how do you pay for that?"

Roland said he had believed that Fanning was rated likely to perform well during earthquakes. But in fact, the building's age and reinforced masonry walls qualify it for a list of potentially vulnerable schools. More than 400 students attend the school annually.

In 2011, records show, the district's own contractors also raised concerns about the school's safety. After visiting Fanning and reviewing the original design plans, Welsh Structures Inc. determined more evaluation was needed based on federal guidelines used to screen potential seismic hazards.

But the district didn't prioritize a detailed study. It appears nothing happened until after the March 28 earthquake, when the Register provided Roland with documents outlining the state's warnings.

Now it appears Brea Olinda Unified is moving more quickly to upgrade Fanning and nearby Arovista Elementary, which has been similarly flagged by the state. Both of the schools' walls are composed of reinforced masonry.

"Based on information you have recently conveyed to WSI, the Brea Olinda USD has made it a priority to provide for seismic building upgrades by including the further seismic studies and retrofit of the buildings at the campuses referenced above in their current Master Plan," Welsh Structures Inc. wrote in a memo addressed to district leaders Monday.

It's unclear when the evaluation or repairs would happen. Roland provided the memo to the Register on Tuesday but couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

Last week, Roland said that no funding is available in the district's current operating budget or from bond sources for a seismic evaluation. The district had sought \$54 million to upgrade schools through a June 2012 ballot initiative but failed to win enough voters by a few percentage points.

"I asked for local funds. I was denied," Roland said.

However, a Register review of the ballot materials shows the initiative's proponents didn't specifically address seismic safety in materials provided to voters. They emphasized technology improvements and replacing portable structures with permanent ones. On school safety, proponents said the money would help update fire alarms, enhance lighting and reconfigure drop-off zones.

Roland said Brea Olinda Unified also has other financial concerns. Slumping enrollment in recent years has cut into state funding and contributed to staffing cuts. District employees' pay has been cut by 8 percent this year through furloughs, Roland said.

IDENTIFYING SEISMIC HAZARDS

The list of schools was compiled by architects at the state Department of General Services at the direction of lawmakers in 2002 and updated in 2008. Among other duties, the architects are responsible for reviewing whether all school construction projects comply with building standards.

In Orange County, most buildings flagged by the architects are in northern, older communities such as Orange, Anaheim and Westminster.

Lawmakers had hoped the inventory would assist school districts in identifying worrisome buildings before catastrophe, but the state allocated no funding to complete the detailed seismic evaluations. For that reason, some districts have largely ignored the state's warnings.

However, Ellen Corbett doesn't hold it against them. As a member of the assembly in 1999, she introduced legislation that required the state to compile a list of potentially vulnerable schools. She said funding proactive evaluations can be challenging and districts may have more immediate needs.

"I hope this information can help people make plans to do the work," she said. "My heart goes out to them. Sometimes it is very difficult to raise the money and get the bonds passed."

Roland said Brea Olinda Unified will review whether state funding may be available to study Fanning Elementary. But he lamented that lawmakers didn't allocate funding for local inspections when they directed state architects to compile an inventory of potentially hazardous school buildings more than a decade ago.

"There never has been any funding allocated to this by the state who generated the report," Roland said. "The state has significantly dodged this discussion."

Corbett declined to say exactly where the money should come from – state coffers or local taxes. She said, "That's a decision that the local district has the responsibility to make."

NO FUNDING IDENTIFIED

In 2004, the California Commission on Seismic Safety recommended that schools flagged as potentially hazardous be required to evaluate their buildings and the state explore funding options to upgrade them. But little changed as a result.

With no detailed study, Roland said the district doesn't know exactly how much seismic stress Fanning Elementary is designed to withstand. The school didn't collapse during the recent 5.1 earthquake, he noted, so it's proven to weather at least that much.

"The building held up relatively well," Roland said. "It may be that the building has no issues."

The March 28 earthquake spread across Southern California from the Puente Hills fault line just a few miles west of the school, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. It was the largest quake originating from Orange County since 1986, according to data published online by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

After the quake, Brea Olinda Unified told parents that Fanning would remain partially closed for several weeks as workers clean up the asbestos. Students in grades two through six have been temporarily moved to Laurel Elementary. All other classes were allowed back into Fanning, because tests didn't find traces of asbestos in their rooms.

Holli Kittleson, president of the school's PTA, said the earthquake brought the community closer together. Parents and local stores donated supplies for classes temporarily moved to Laurel, and preparation has taken on a higher priority.

She was also stunned to learn that her daughter and other Fanning students have been attending a school rated by state architects as potentially hazardous. She said the PTA would look into the issue and might help with fundraising for a detailed seismic evaluation.

In 2002, the state estimated that such evaluations cost about \$16,000 per building.

"It's not a good situation," Kittleson said. "If you're looking at the overall picture, \$16,000 is nothing when you're talking about the safety of your kids. It's a lot but it's doable."